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The clothing acquisition of Mexican-American consumers in the United States

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Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies

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The Clothing Acquisition of Mexican-American Consumers in the United States

Student
Gilberto Rivera-Mendez

Committee

Major Professor
Dr. Russell Laczniaik

Dr. Linda Niehm

Dr. Suman Lee

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ABSTRACT

Recently articles in marketing, advertising and consumer research periodicals have discussed the importance of Hispanic consumers in the United States and have hypothesized a number of variables which may differentiate Hispanics from non – Hispanics. In today's environment it would be foolish to ignore the Hispanic or Latino market in the United States (Lober, 2004) and it is growing more rapid than all other ethnic groups between 1990 and 2000.

The present study used natural observations from ten Mexican-American women at an Ames, IA mall to identify the principal cues of the clothing purchasing process activity. In general, it suggests a marked distinction between Mexico and other Hispanic countries when it comes to attitude. With consumption habits likely to have both a strong affinity with prevalent U.S. core values and also reflect Mexicans struggles.

Consumers were observed when they shopped at Aeropostale, Gap and American Eagle. The three stores were not artificially created especially for the study, these retailers are those that consumers are familiar with, and so, the researcher was able to observe what actually happened in a "real-world" situation. At the end, consumers appeared to be price sensitive, looking for a dress concept according to their personalities and not focus on brand names.

INTRODUCTION

This study examined the purchasing habits of clothing items for ten Mexican-American women. The study used an observation as a method to identify how they acted while buying fashion related products. Through this study, we hope to identify the style of clothes that Mexican consumers buy and where the best places to shop. This project utilizes different variables such as price, style, season, and brand (company) to explore these two areas of interest.

The study is important since there are more than 39 million Latinos in the United States, turning the United States into the fourth biggest Latin-American country after Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina. Thus this is clearly an important segment of the U.S market. The 2000 Census also confirmed this striking aspect of Latino population growth, now at 13 million, with a noticeable number now residing in areas that previously had relatively few Latinos. Moreover, projections suggest that the Latino population will continue to grow at a much faster rate than the U.S. population well into the next century (Chapa, 2004). Mexican-Americans are the largest sub-segment of Latin-American inhabitants in the United States (Lober, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to *Brand Strategy* (Brand Strategy, 2005), the psyche of every country is, to varying degrees, a product of its culture, history and geography, and helps explain certain attitudes and behaviors of the people. Mexico shares a number of cultural and historical milestones with countries of Central and South America, including European colonization, wars of independence, struggles for democracy, rigid class structure, and a widespread inequality. But there is a marked distinction between Mexico and other Hispanic countries when it comes to attitude. Research shows that Mexicans appear to have a strong affinity with typical American values. Thus, Mexico seems to have formed an attitudinal as well as physical bridge between the USA and much of Latin America. Therefore Mexican-American shoppers consumption habits are likely to have both a strong affinity with prevalent U.S. core values and also reflect Mexican struggles.

Businesses would be foolish to ignore the Hispanic American market in the United States. With an increase of almost 13 million persons between 1990 and 2000, from 22.4 million up to 35.3 million, the Hispanic-American population grew more rapidly than any other ethnic group over the decade. The proportion of the non-Hispanic population, however, only increased by 5.3% and the population in general increased only 13.5 % in this same period (Valdes, 2006). Additionally, the 2000 Census shows that the Mexican-American population represents the 67% of the total Hispanic populace living in the United States

(Office of the American Census, 2000). This means that Mexican-American consumers represent a significant segment for retailers.

Recently articles in marketing, advertising and consumer research periodicals have discussed the importance of Hispanic consumers in the United States and have hypothesized a number of variables which may differentiate Hispanics from non-Hispanics in terms of shopping interests (Hoover, 1985). In addition to the consumer behavior analyses, sociological research demonstrates a greater affinity for brand loyalty among Hispanics. One extensive study by Holtzman, Diaz-Guerrero and Swartz (1975) concluded that compared to North Americans, Mexican nationals are, among other things, are "...less active in problem--solving style, less complex in 'cognitive structure' more internal, more fatalistic, and less competitive..." Such a pattern of characteristics would seem to point toward a greater tendency to remain loyal to a brand previously used. A second study by Mirowsky and Ross (1984) indicates that both U.S. and Mexican Hispanics are external in attribution of locus of control (i.e. more fatalistic) compared to non-Hispanics. This trait might also be expected to result in greater brand loyalty if consumers believe that their purchase satisfaction will be independent of their own choice initiatives.

However, according to *Brand Strategy*, socializing provides Mexicans with the best arena to display power and status through shopping habits. Therefore, Mexican-Americans also tend to use brands as status symbols but are keen to

differentiate themselves from the old-fashioned, traditional elite and are ready to embrace 'softer' expressions of power.

Additionally, it is important to mention that consumers have knowledge about, are conscience of, and have experience with where their interests are in relation to the products, the services and the brands they prefer. This presumption becomes invalid when the marketing is directed by individuals not familiar with the target population and the appropriate marketing techniques for the respective society. The place of birth and the duration of the residence in the United States of the Hispanic population are factors that will continue have an impact in the marketing of products to this group (Valdes, 2006). The consumers with less cultural assimilation will tend to look for a different product mix and services, and answer to different emotional impulses than those with a significant cultural assimilation. This way, with the idiomatic segmentation, a marketing manager can develop different strategies designed for specific segments of the population depending on the culture, or develop strategies for several segments of the market characterizes as being "of high potential" if additional information is available.

Culture, costumes and traditions plays a significant role when buying apparel products. These values are passed on by the family members, so even Mexican-Americans born in the United States are likely to be influenced by their background. Another example of this is the Chinese culture which emphasizes

collectivism, "passive acceptance" of fate, submission to authority, and ancestor worship (Hsu, 1981). Pan, Chaffee, Chu, and Ju (1994) note that consumption habits within this population are influenced by heritage. In this review of the literature, we have noted several factors that affect the shopping behavior of the Mexican-American population in the United States. In this project, we seek to understand the role of culture and values in shaping the shopping habits of this population.

RQ: How do culture and values affect the apparel purchasing process of Mexican-American consumers?

METHODOLOGY

This study was done through the qualitative method of observation. It focused on in a specific segment of Mexican-American consumers living in the United States. These consumers were observed at as they shopped for apparel products and field notes were used to record their shopping process.

Observation does not often appear as a research methodology in the marketing literature mainly because it is often hard to quantify the outcomes of observational research at the outset. Others note that it is time consuming and it is difficult to generalize the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nevertheless, observation may be the only method to obtain data on consumers' behavior in certain situations (Foxall, 1996; Grove and Fisk, 1992; Hirschman, 1986). As

such, we utilized observation as the method of data collection because of the limitations on obtaining data on consumer behavior.

Observational research has been classified in terms of various dichotomies (see, for example, Malhotra, 1996; Rebello, 1977). There are several widely used classifications, of which the most popular are a) human versus machine, b) structured versus unstructured, c) overt versus covert, d) natural versus disguised and e) participant versus non-participant. Each of these classifications is discussed below.

a) Human versus Machine Observation

Observation is often described in terms of who (or what) is doing the observation (McDaniel and Gates, 1995). When the observation is less structured, particularly in the initial stages of a research project, a human-being, rather than a machine, is often considered the appropriate medium because while a machine is superior in terms of speed, a human-being is able to interpret actors. Larger-scaled, statistically-driven observations often necessitate the use of a machine as the observer, such as EPoS equipment which is utilized to track product sales. Additionally, certain observable phenomena may not be visible to the naked eye hence the development of equipment such as the pupilometer and the psychogalvanometer (Zikmund, 1989).

b) Structured versus Unstructured Observation

The degree to which a period of observation is structured largely depends on the stage of the research project. In the early stages of research, before the development of working hypotheses, observation tends to be unstructured (or ad-libitum) in an attempt to identify variables to investigate more scientifically (i.e. in a more structured fashion). Altman (1974, p. 235) refers to the unstructured recording of behavior as typical field notes, with the researcher "recording as much as he can or whatever is most readily observed..." Structured observation, used by the researchers when they know in advanced what to watch for often involves time sampling, like the detailed (usually quantifiable) recording of a phenomenon over a given time-frame.

c) Overt versus Covert Observation

Often discussed in terms of ethics (Adler and Adler, 1994), observation can be either overt – where people are aware of being observed – or covert – where those being observed are not aware that it is taking place. Covert observation is often used in focus group discussions with someone secretly records reactions and body language in some detail (Zikmund, 1989).

d) Natural versus Contrived Observation

This classification is concerned with where the observation takes place: either in the observees' natural physical environment or in a contrived setting such as an artificially created supermarket set. It is argued by many academics

that observation should, as far as possible, take place in natural environments because those being observed will tend to be more relaxed, thus giving the researcher a real picture of the phenomenon in question, since “reactivity” is minimized (Bryman, 1992).

e) Participatory versus Non-Participatory Observation

A dividing line is drawn between those who participate in the context of the research and those who do not. Those who do not participate are known as non-participatory observers. Participant observers, on the other hand, have been further subdivided by Gold (1958) into the complete participant, the participant as observer, the observer as participant, and the complete observer. The first conceals his research role, the next two reveal their research roles while participation varies from a great deal to a minimum, and the complete observer is entirely removed from social interaction with his informants and observes in unobtrusive ways (Rebello, 1977).

To realize the purpose of this study, we chose human, structured, covert, natural and non participatory observation to examine consumers while buying in their natural shopping environment because this allows the observer to understand the phenomenon while the buyers interact with the market.

Observation is an appropriate methodology for conducting market research when at least one of the following four criteria is met:

1. The phenomenon under investigation is easily observable;
2. The phenomenon under investigation is a social process or a mass activity;
3. The phenomenon under investigation occurs at a subconscious level;
4. The consumers under investigation are either unable or unwilling to communicate directly with the researcher.

Participants

Ten Mexican-American female consumers in Ames, Iowa will be observed to collect the data for this study. This is not a representative sample of the population thus the results should not be considered as being generalizable to the whole Mexican-American women population. However relating these findings to the existent literature about their consumption habits could help determine if the have the same patterns arise in Ames, as found in the other American states. Women were selected for this study because consumer behavior research indicates women truly enjoy the shopping experience compared to their male counterparts (Van Slyke, et. all, 2002). The participants will be identified as being Mexican-American based upon their ethnographic and personality characteristics and also the manner they speak Spanish, vocabulary and pronunciation change typical to Mexico.

Procedures

The observation method was chosen because it allows for a large amount of information to be collected from the sample. An observation guideline (see Appendix 1) was used in this study, which established the variables that were to be observed in a systematic way. Consumers were observed while shopping at Aeropostale, Gap and American Eagle. These stores are considered to be popular among the Mexican population, because these brands are found in stores in Mexico. Moreover, the companies were selected because they currently have strong and successful niche markets or guide companies in the development of niche markets.

Data was over a fifteen-day observation period at the North Grand Mall in Ames, Iowa. To collect ordinary consumers' responses an observation bullet point guideline was used. The observer recorded observed buying actions of the consumers.

Observation was considered the most appropriate research methodology in the case of consumer high-street traffic flows because:

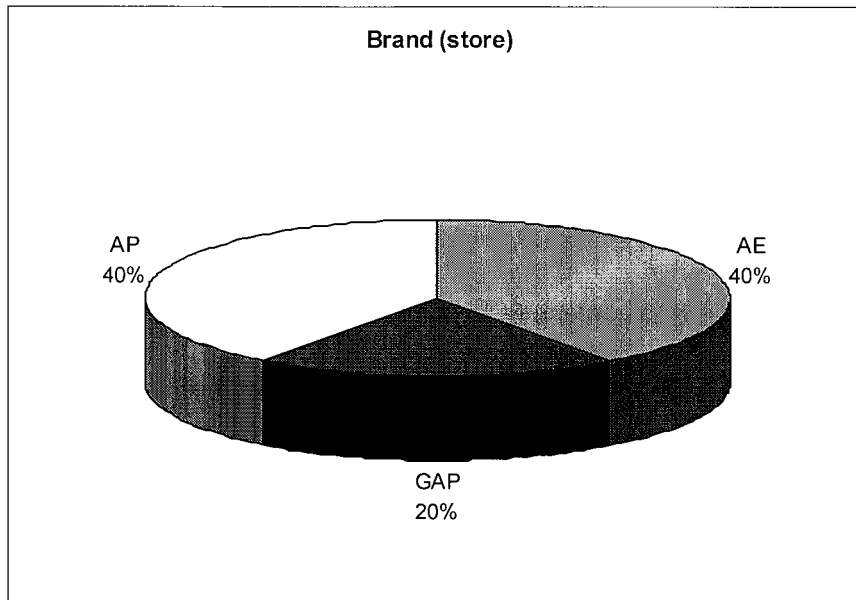
- The clothing purchase process of Mexican-American consumers is easily observable.
- Shopping is a popular activity and a social process, so it was easier and more economical for the researcher to observe the phenomenon than

interview those taking part. Moreover, if an individual shopper is stopped for an interview, the shopper's individual pattern of shopping behavior is immediately disrupted. Therefore, an interview approach was considered inappropriate.

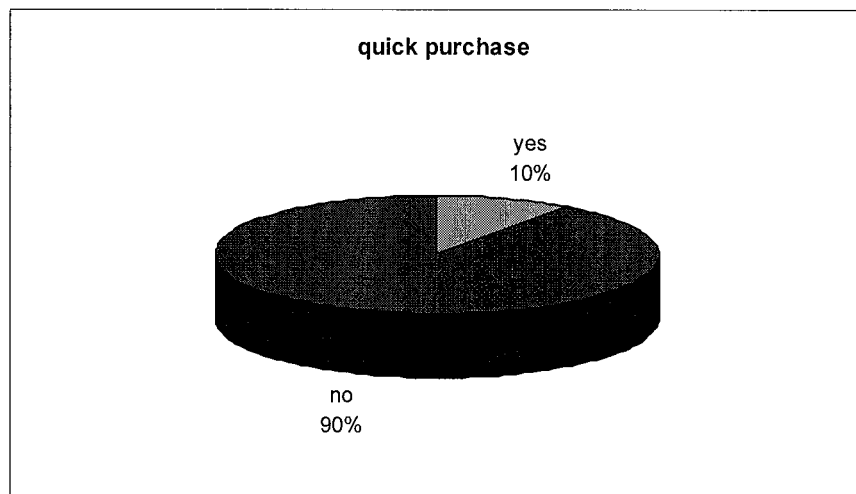
- Some of the factors affecting high-street consumer traffic flows may have only a subconscious effect on shoppers (Boote & Mathews, 1999).

The observation technique has the key advantage of unobtrusiveness, and at this stage of the research project, more detailed customer information was not required. Referring to the classifications of observational studies given earlier, it is possible to classify the study under discussion in several ways. The three stores, American Eagle, Gap, Aeropostale, are those that consumers are familiar with, allowing the researcher to observe a "real-world" situation. Finally, with regard to the degree of participation, the observation which took place at the stores was non-participatory in some cases and participatory in others.

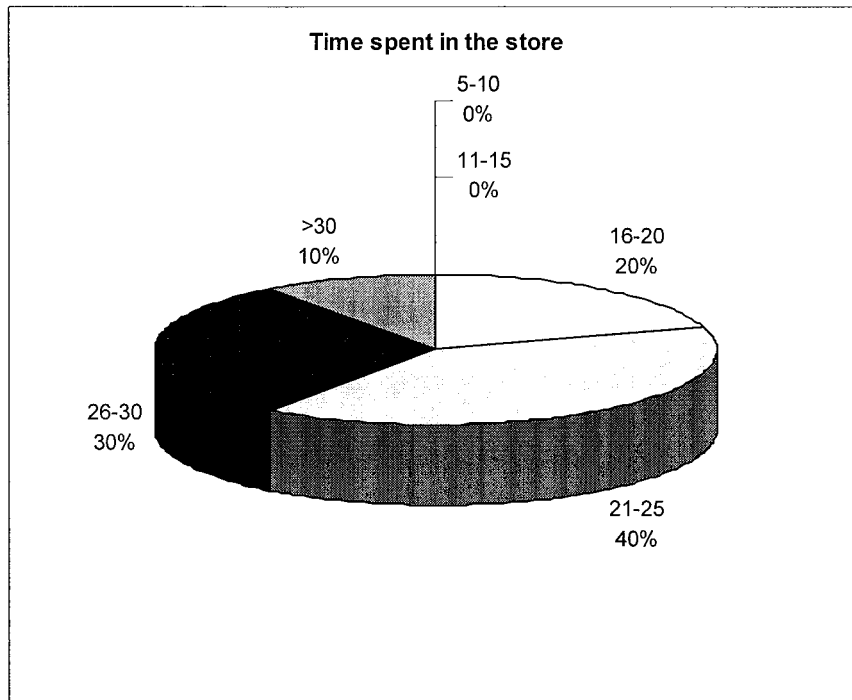
RESULTS



Consumers appeared to have a preference over Aeropostale and American Eagle 40% each, and the remaining 20% shopping at GAP

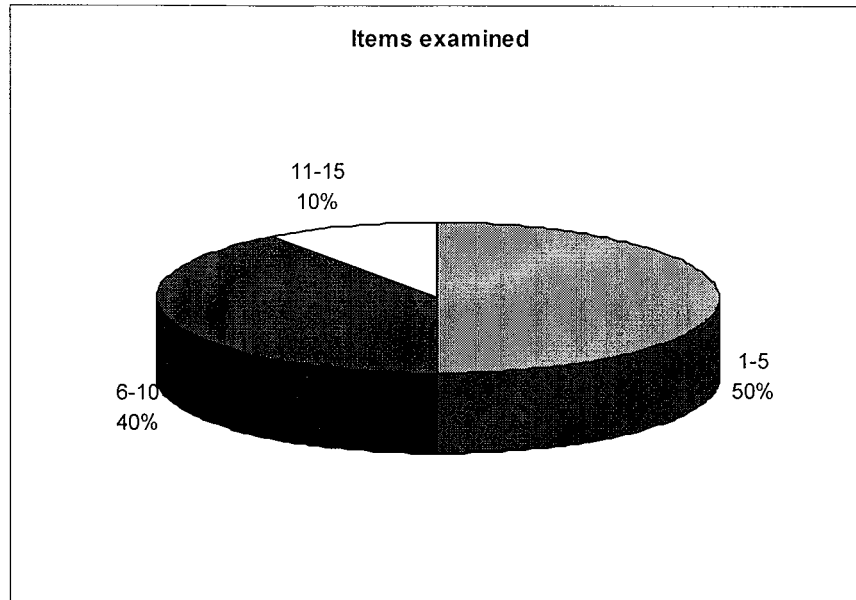


90% of the consumers did not make a quick decision in their purchase. Most reviewed the apparel items in the shelves, deciding whether or not to purchase the products.

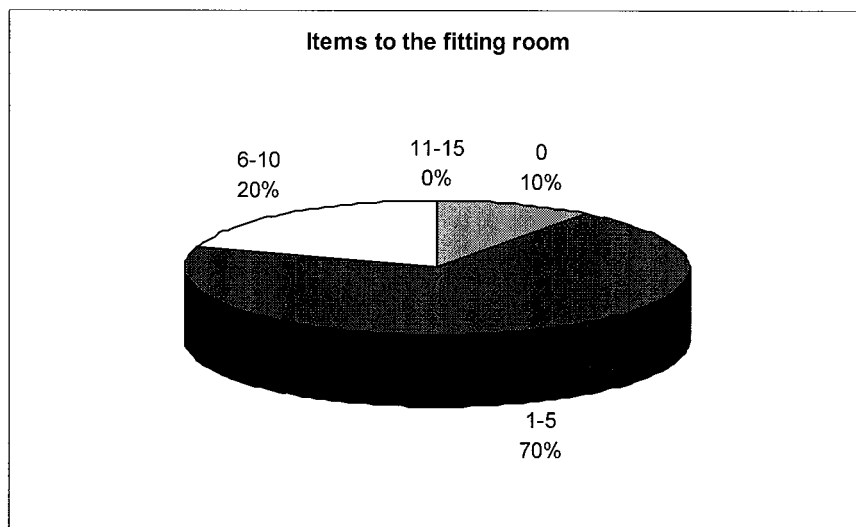


On average, the consumers spent twenty-five minutes in the purchasing process, representing 40% of the observees. In general, the consumers were in the stores for a long period of time while making their purchases.

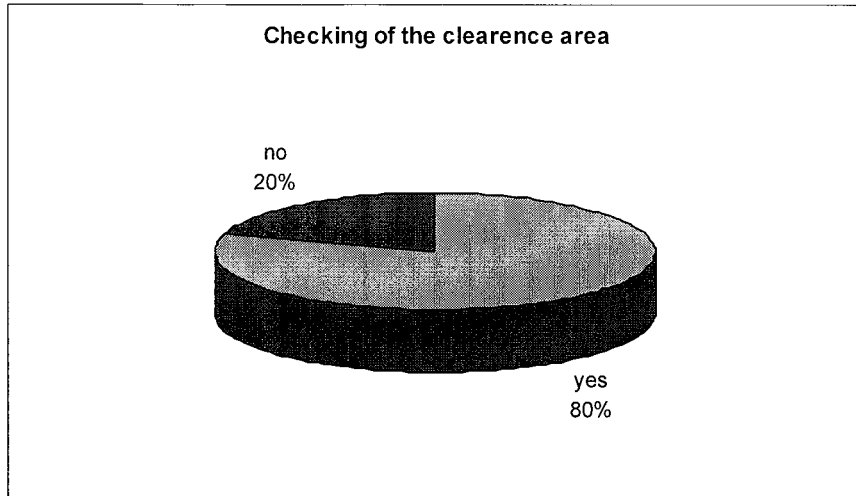
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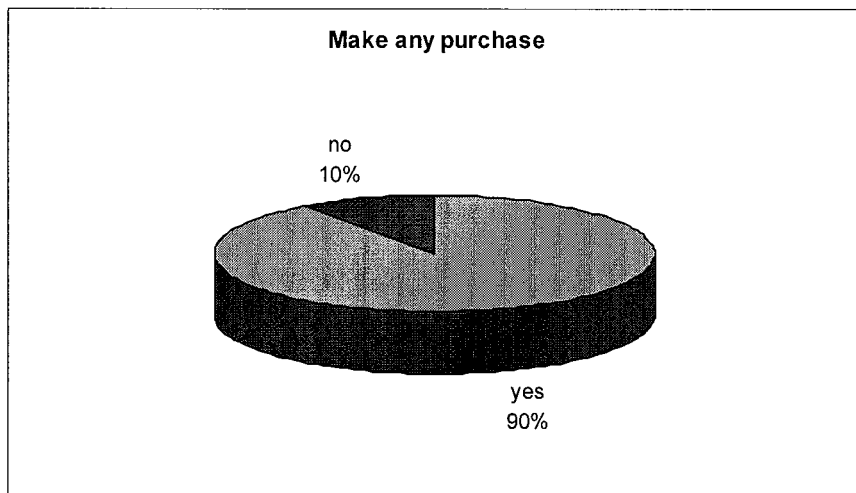
Many of the Mexican-American consumers, 50%, examined an average of 5 items, while the rest of the observees, 40%, looked at 6 or more items, and just a few, 10%, examined more than 11.



70% of the consumers took 1 to 5 of the apparel items to the fitting room, representing the majority of the women observed, while the other 20% took more than 6 articles.

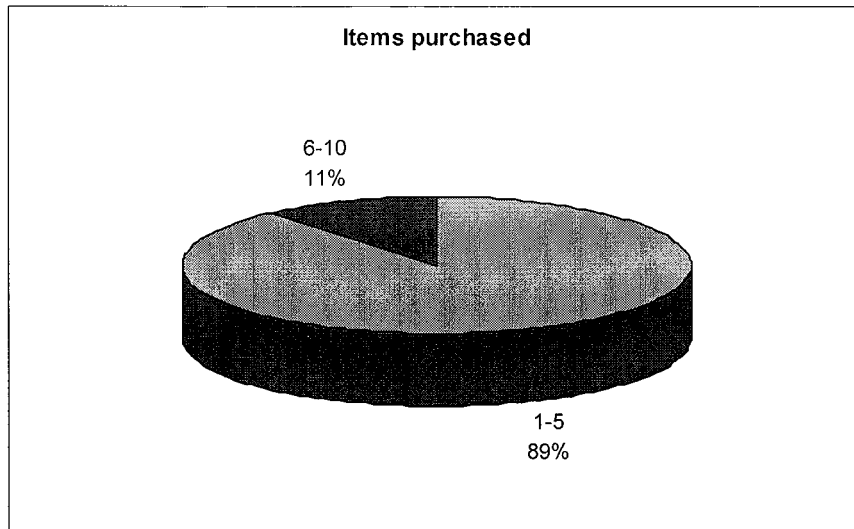


80% of the consumers explored the clearance area, analyzing the price and searching for clothes with the lowest cost. Only 20% did not examine this area.

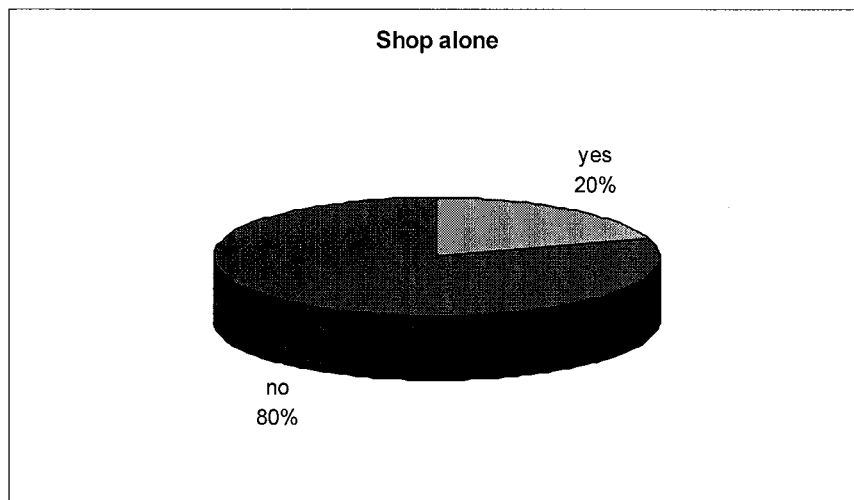


Most of the consumers, 90%, purchased some of the apparel items they examined at the stores. The other 10% did not make any purchase.

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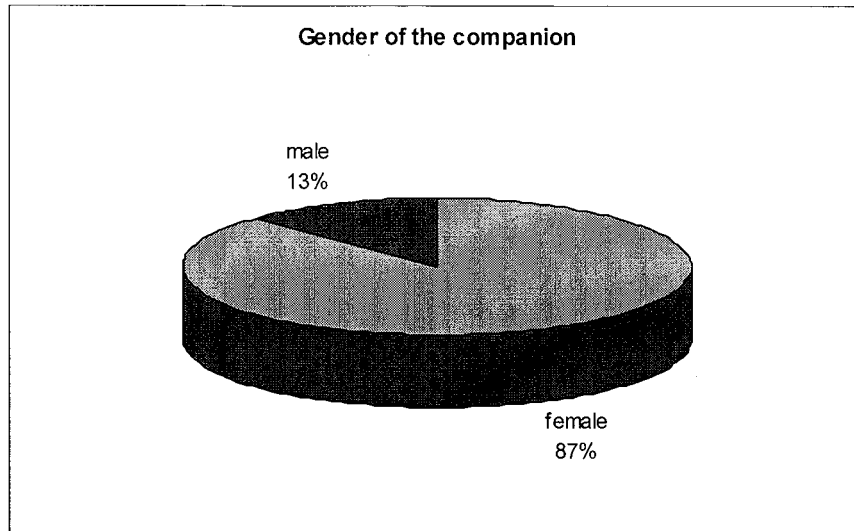


89% of the consumers purchased on average 5 items while the rest of the clients observed, 11%, bought more than 6 products.

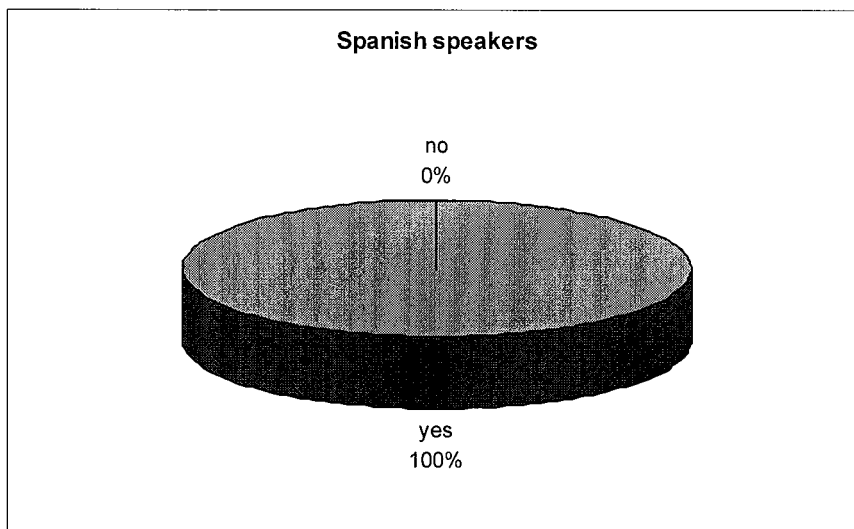


80% of those consumers went shopping with a companion. Approval from their friends seemed to be important while making the purchase. The other 20% shopped alone.

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Most of the consumers, 87%, were at the stores with other females, while the other 13% were with men.



All of the Mexican-American consumers spoke Spanish with their companions at the stores while making the purchases.

FINDINGS

The observational data yielded a number of important generalizations that appear to affect the acquisition of clothes among Hispanic women. Specifically:

- Consumers appeared to be price sensitive as 80% explored the clearance section. Participants often checked the clearance area even if these items were currently not in season.
- According to previous research, Mexican-Americans were more willing to be brand loyal. Data collected do not support this statement. The 70% of the Mexican-American women studied appeared to look for the dress concept according to their personalities are not focus on brand names. Therefore, Mexican-American customers in Ames, Iowa might not use brands a status model even though the brand names of the stores were well known to them.
- All of the Mexican-American women observed did not appear to make fast decisions. They spent in average around twenty-five minutes shopping. Observations suggest these women are quite analytical when they shopped. They appeared to pay attention to the shapes and size, analyzing which item would be the most adequate for them.

- Most of the customers bought the items that they examined. 80% of the customers shopped with others, often another Mexican-American female, which represent 87% of the companions. Only the 13% of the observers shopped with male companions. They spoke in Spanish most of the time but used English when they wanted to talk with the store's staff.

CONCLUSION

The study hinted at several in-store factors that influence the Mexican-American women where they select clothes to buy. The main factor appeared to be price. Season did not appear to be an important factor, due to the fact that the customers often selected out season clothing. Mexican-American consumers in this research were following the same patterns of consumption.

Finally, the study showed that Mexican-American consumers are not necessarily brand loyal. Those studied did not appear to demonstrate preferences among those stores (brands). Clearly, the presence of style as a shopping factor and the environment of the mall could potentially enhance the fashion consciousness of the Mexican-American consumers.

LIMITATIONS

It is necessary that we discuss the limitations of this research. The subjects of study were sample of convenience and are not a representative sample of the Mexican-American population in the United States. The reason for using observation in the present study was to elicit behavior patterns of which those being observed were largely unaware. However, observation cannot provide information about the insights of the people, and some questions such as why they are behaving in different ways. Observation just helps to report data about what people are doing and how they are going about this process. However, via observation, researchers can generate ideas as to what consumers actually do when shopping, and not rely on claim to have done (Boote and Mathews, 1999).

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study will lend to the development of hypotheses for additional study as opposed definitive conclusions by addressing some of the limitations and questions that arise from this paper. For example, although there are similarities and differences between the Anglo and Mexican cultures it would be interesting analyze what motivates customers the most among the Mexican or U.S. values. A complete description of their consumption activities could be done by

answering the why question through different research methods such as in-depth interviews, allowing researchers to comprehend personal opinions and beliefs and uncover hidden issues. Another methodological approach could be to utilize focus groups to acquire feedback regarding new products and also allow companies wishing to develop, package, name, or test market a new product to discuss, view, and/or test the new product before it is made available to the public. This can provide invaluable information about the potential market acceptance of the product to understand the relation of the economical power of this segment and the development of new stores' strategies.

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APENDIX No. 1

OBSERVATION GUIDELINE

Date_____

American Eagle

GAP

Aeropostale

Type of items she is buying

What the consumer look for?

Price

Quality

Style

Brand

Color

Can she make a fast decision of purchase?

How much time spent in the store?

How many items has she examined?

How many items did she take to the fitting room?

Is the consumer checking the clearance area?

Did she make any purchase?

How many items?

Did she shop alone?

Male partner

Female partner

Did they speak Spanish?

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